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ABSTRACT

To determine whether journalists withhold mobilizing information (any information that allows people to act on the attitudes and desires they already have), 56 professional journalists were asked to edit a nine-paragraph story about a wave of beetles that supposedly threatened large stands of timber. There were two versions of this story: the controversial context version and the positive context version. Each version of the story contained identical sets of mobilizing information (MI) in the fourth, sixth, eighth, and ninth paragraphs. The editing task was explained as a "study in editing," and neither the concept of MI nor the existence of MI in the stories was mentioned during the entire test session. Results showed that the experienced professinals did eliminate more MI when the story was controversial, and the barriers they raised against MI in the controversial context rose even higher as soon as it was suggested that the story be cut. In contrast, MI continued to be relatively untouched when the journalists looked for ways to cut positive context stories by one, two, and four paragraphs. The results produced the overriding impression that, somehow, the MI was less "relevant" and "necessary" when it appeared in a controversial public affairs story than when it appeared in a positive context news item. (Copies of the two versions of the story are appended.) (HOD)

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News Context and the Elimination of Mobilizing Information: An Experiment with Professional Journalists

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CS 207685

An increasing amount of research attention is being paid to a concept called "mobilizing information."[1] Mobilizing information (MI) is, according to Lemert, any information that allows people to act on the attitudes and desires they already have.[2] MI often is present in consumer advertising: store names and addresses/hours of opening/brand names, descriptions and prices of goods, etc. But in news content, MI often will be provided--or withheld--in a very systematic way. Often it will be provided on the Business Page but not in the main news pages, in "safe" or "positive-context" news stories but not in news of political controversies, in the form of recipes, gardening tips and criminal modus operandi but not in the form of political "how-to-do-it" MI.[3]

Interest groups, "insiders" and others with political savvy don't need to depend on external, public sources of MI such as the mass media. They already know how to reach key decision makers. Without political MI in the media, participation will tend to be limited to persons who already have the MI or can get it on their own. With relevant MI in the mass media, the number and variety of participants is likely to increase markedly when the issue is important to media audiences. In E.E. Schattschneider's term, the "scope" of the issue has been enlarged and, when enlarged, its outcome may have been changed as well.[4] The clear implication of MI for Schattschneider's "scope" concept is that when MI is withheld by journalists, "insiders" can more easily manage and control those citizen policy expressions which do reach decision makers.

Three types of MI have been identified in the mass media:

1) Locational--information is given about both time and place of chances for activity, e.g., meeting "advance" stories/ TV program and channel lists;

2) Identificational--provides both an identification of some kind (e.g., name/photo/description) and enough locational information (e.g., address or phone number) to allow contact;

3) Tactical--gives implicit or explicit behavioral models.

According to Lemert and colleagues, journalists either withhold or provide MI, depending on what the "context" of the news item is. If the context is positive--e.g., a story about a charitable drive or some other widely supported community project--they say that journalists are much more likely to put MI in the story than when the news story is about political controversy. However, almost all the evidence these researchers have amassed consists of content analyses of printed or broadcast media messages. Even though news content consistently had MI far more often in positive than controversial contexts, we could still argue that the lower MI rate merely results from the fact that news sources don't wish to provide MI to reporters when sources are embroiled in a controversy. If this happened, then we might find news of controversies to have MI less often because the MI wasn't available, not because it was withheld by journalists.

Rather than content analyses, then, a much more definitive test of whether journalists withhold MI would be to provide the same MI to journalists in controversial as well as positive

contexts--and then see what they do with it. That is what the present study--an experiment in which context was manipulated but the MI stayed the same--is intended to do. A small-scale experiment which manipulated context and observed journalists' editing behavior has been reported by Lemert in his recent book,[5] but the experiment's usefulness for our present purposes is limited. First, it pooled data for context with that for another manipulated variable and, second, the results were based on an extremely small sample (in effect, only seven professional journalists).

If changing story context also changes the willingness of journalists to provide MI, we would expect journalists to delete MI fron controversial context stories but to leave it in when they are working on positive context stories. If, on the other hand, we were to find instead that changes of context made no difference in the amount of MI journalists left in stories, then it would be possible to argue that context would not matter as long as information sources gave the MI to the journalists who were covering them.

Lemert, Mitzman, Seither, Cook and Hackett reported that wire and bureau news stories were much less likely to have MI than stories done by local newspaper staff, even after context was held constant.[6] Our line of argument parallels that for context: In order to test whether decisions by wire and bureau journalists can account for the absence of MI, we need to provide the same MI to both newspaper journalists and those working for bureau and wire services--and then see what they do

with it. Given the same information to work with, then, will the bureau and wire journalists be more likely than the others to cut the MI out? Once again, if there is no difference between the two groups of journalists, we might have to look elsewhere for an explanation of the marked difference between them in content analysis results.

Method

Experimental Subjects--56 professional journalists were recruited to serve as experimental Ss. All were employed full time as news reporters and editors. Included among the 56 were 13 bureau and wire service journalists, composed of 4 AP and UPI journalists who worked in each service's principal metropolitan office, and 9 reporters who worked as bureau correspondents at the state capitol. These nine correspondents spent almost all their time covering state government. Of the 43 newspaper journalists, a total of 21 worked for the state's two largest dailes, and the remaining 22 worked on four medium-to-small dailes, each located more than 100 miles away from the state's largest city.

Median experience for these journalists was 10.83 years; only three of them had a year or less of professional experience, and two reported 30 or more years. Almost half (27) were reporters; 15 were assistant editors, 12 were senior editors and 2 were columnists. Most (37) said they worked primarily in the public affairs news area. Almost all the rest worked on business, sports, women's or other special news sections; one

was an editorial writer. Almost all Ss were men. All Ss had attended at least some college, and all but nine of them had earned at least an AB or BS. Most (37) had been journalism majors in college.

The Context Manipulation--Journalists were asked to edit a nine-paragraph story about a wave of beetles that supposedly threatened large stands of timber. There were two versions of this story, the controversial context version and the positive context version. Each version of the story contained identical sets of MI in the fourth, sixth, eighth and ninth paragraphs. The controversial context version of this story introduced the issue of whether DDT might be used against the beetles while the positive context version did not.

Perhaps the two versions of the lead illustrate the differences and similarities:

Postive Context Lead	Controversial Context Lead
Another wave of bugs may be destroying huge amounts of Douglas fir.	Another wave of bugs may be destroying huge amounts of Douglas fir -- and stimulating pressure for use again of the controversial pesticide DDT to control it.

Obviously, the underlined portion made the two lead versions different. There were two other important differences between the bodies of the stories: Only the controversial context story contained information (a) that the EPA once before had

granted an exemption to use DDT and (b) that environmentalists fear DDT because it has a prolonged after-life, most likely passing up the food chain in dangerous concentrations.

Essentially, the controversial version was the positive context story with the additional, controversy-implying material added to it. Through adjustments in spacing, paragraphing and line width, the positive-context version was only one typed line shorter than the controversial version. (Each story is reproduced in the Appendix.)

Journalists were randomly assigned to one version or the other of the story, with the restriction that, insofar as it was possible, equal numbers of journalists at each testing site got each version. Testing was done at each news agency during working hours. The two groups of metropolitan newspaper journalists assembled separately and worked on the copy in their newspapers' common staff meeting room. In almost all other cases, the journalists edited the copy at their desks.

The editing task was explained as a "study in editing," and neither the concept of MI nor the existence of MI in the stories was mentioned during the entire test session. For masking and "warm-up" purposes, journalists first edited another short article before they worked on the test article. The masking article concerned state regulation of strip mining. As each journalist completed the editing, s/he was handed a questionnaire.

The Questionnaire--Each two-page questionnaire was filled out anonymously, but the experimenters matched that person's edited copy with the questionnaire. The questionnaire began

with several demographic questions and then asked a series of questions about the story journalists had just edited. The questions were: (a) How newsworthy did you think the story was? (b) What paragraphs would you eliminate if the story had to be shortened by one, two and four paragraphs? and (c) When you actually edited the story, did you shorten or eliminate paragraphs No. 4, 6, 8 and 9, and, if you did, why did you do it? (Note: These four paragraphs contained the MI.)

Since the questionnaire was self-administered, journalists worked at their own paces and completed the tasks with very little disturbance to their colleagues. Most journalists completed the entire procedure easily in less than 40 minutes.

Results

The tables that follow will present results in the form of Multiple Classification Analysis. As MCA is a relatively new form of analysis to many communications scholars, a brief explanation of it may be appropriate. The tables will report both the original, "raw" means and "adjusted" means (adjusted means have had the apparent influence of each one of the other independent variables completely extracted via regression procedures; interactions, if any, have been allowed to contribute to the error term in the significance tests). The analysis of variance tests are performed on the "partial" regression coefficient for each predictor. A fairly complete reference source for the MCA procedure is the programmer's manual for the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences.[7]

Each table will present MCA results for each of four predictor variables: context, agency (newspaper vs. wire/bureau), experience in years and proportion of time spent covering politics. The latter two were entered as covariates but given the same weight as context and agency in the solution. We entered time spent covering politics as a covariate because some previous research[8] suggests that MI may face an extra, residual obstacle to publication when it is processed by journalists working for the main public affairs section of newspapers. Experience was entered on the supposition that obstacles to MI might increase with years of repetitive elimination of MI on the job.

Table 1 presents MCA results for the total number of times the MI was eliminated from the test story during the editing phase (range: 0-4). Interestingly, the mean number of cuts consistently was under 2.0, regardless of whether we are considering "raw" means or the adjusted ones. Significantly more MI was left in the story, however, when the story was in a positive context $p < .05$). And bureau and wire journalists cut much more MI than did the newspaper journalists ($p < .02$), regardless of context. Neither experience in years nor proportion of time covering politics predicted the number of MI "cuts"--and this was true both before, and after, the regressions had been partialled.

Table 1 about here

Closer examination of each of the four sets of MI in the story shows via MCA that, regardless of context, wire/bureau journalists were especially likely ($p < .001$) to eliminate the tactical MI in paragraph four ("the only presently available way of controlling the beetles is to . . . , etc."). They were also more likely ($p < .05$) to cut out all the identificational MI in the ninth paragraph. Context influenced what happened in the ninth--and last--paragraph. When they were working with the controversial version, all journalists were especially likely ($p < .05$) to eliminate all the MI in that paragraph. That MI included the name and address of the trade association that, presumably, eventually would request that DDT be used. It also included the name and address of the state government department with presumed jurisdiction in the matter. (The results reported in this paragraph are not tabled and were produced through MCA using the four predictors.)

Interestingly, neither context nor journalists' news agency was related to the mentioning of partisanship reasons for cutting MI. In fact, none of the MCA predictors was related to the offering of this kind of explanation. Perhaps this could be expected, since hardly anyone ever gave an explanation that sounded like the partisanship reasons Lemert cited in his experiment. Instead, the single most frequently given reason for cutting MI was that it was irrelevant, not needed, or wasted words--"dull detail" reasons, in Lemert's terminology.[9] When the story context was controversial, journalists who removed the MI were far more likely to give a "dull detail" reason than when the context was positive. (Data not tabled, $p < .05$, MCA).

Table 2 about here

While the mean amount of MI actually eliminated was less than half of that which was in the story, what happened when the journalists were later confronted with the need to cut the story by, in turn, one, two and four paragraphs? How many of them turned to the paragraphs with MI? Table 2 reports the MCA results for what would happen if the stories had to be shortened by <u>one</u> paragraph. When the context of the story was controversial, the paragraph eliminated almost always was one with MI in it, while that happend less often when the context was positive (p .01). Wire/bureau journalists tended (p about .15) more often to choose paragraphs with MI to cut, regardless of context. Neither experience in years nor amount of time spent on political news seemed to make an independent contribution.

The same general patterns held when we asked journalists to select <u>two</u> paragraphs for elimination. Once again, only context reached acceptable significance levels (p .001). As for eliminating <u>four</u> paragraphs, once again context was the only predictor to emerge at an acceptable significance level (p .01). The other three predictors--agency, years of experience and political time--emerged as not very important independent variables in these MCA's.

Tables 3, 4 about here

There was a nonsignificant tendency for the controversial context group to be more likely to rate their story as high in news value. Two thirds of the 27 journalists in the controversial treatment group gave the story high news value, compared to slightly less than half those in the positive context group ($X^2 = 1.788$, $p < .25$).

Summary and Discussion

Based on these results, it does seem likely that MI is missing in news of political controversy at least partly because journalists decide to withhold it. The possibility that MI isn't given to journalists when sources are discussing "substantive" matters of controversy was eliminated as a factor in this experiment. Journalists had the same MI to work with in both versions of the story. Even after controls were exerted for three other predictors, context emerged consistently as a strong predictor of when (and how often) MI will be cut from stories.

In brief, then, this experiment strongly suggests that working journalists will hesitate to provide MI when they are producing news items about controversy--even when the journalists have the MI already in hand. It is still conceivable, of course, that sometimes when MI is missing from controversial news it is because journalists never had the MI in hand. But the chance that this accounts entirely for why MI is missing from controversial news seems more remote now. These experienced professionals did eliminate more MI when the story was controversial, and the barriers they raised against MI in the

controversial context rose even higher as soon as we suggested the story should be cut. In contrast, MI continued to be relatively unscathed when the journalists looked for ways to cut positive context stories by one, two and four paragraphs.

The experiment also suggests that, at least in terms of unforced editing behavior, there is something about the training or role of bureau and wire journalists that acts as an additional obstacle to MI. Once again, the design of this experiment rules out the possibility that bureau/wire copy lacks MI because these journalists never had the MI in the first place. Based on content studies which show bureau and wire reports to be less likely to have MI even after context is controlled, Lemert suggests that bureau/wire journalists are especially likely to think MI, such as addresses, is "dull detail." Indeed, when they did cut MI out, our bureau/wire journalists were somewhat more likely than the others ($p = .069$) to offer "dull detail" kinds of reasons.

Nevertheless, other results produce the overriding impression that, somehow, the MI was less "relevant" and "necessary" when it appeared in a controversial public affairs story than when it appeared in a positive context news item. In other words, "dull detail" was offered as a reason for cutting MI far more often when the story was controversial. In effect, the name and address of an industrial association was said to be "unnecessary" to the story only when that association might be involved in a controversy.

TABLE 1

"Raw" and Adjusted Mean Numbers of Times
MI was Eliminated from Test News Story,
by Story Context and News Agency

Context	Unadjusted Means[a]	Adjusted Means[b]	
Positive	.83	.81	N=19
Controversial	1.37	1.39	N=27
News Agency Type			
Wire/bureau	1.77	1.89	N=13
Newspapers	.88	.85	N=43

Source of Variance	Sum of Variance	df	Mean Square	F	p-level
Experience in Years	.855	1	.855	.848	---
% Time Politics	1.174	1	1.174	1.164	---
Context	4.286	1	4.286	4.251	$p<.05$
Agency	6.808	1	6.808	6.752	$p<.02$
Residual	51.418	51	1.008		

a Unadjusted scores are raw means for each group, calculated before apparent influence of other three predictors removed.

b Adjusted mean scores reflect differences between groups after removing apparent influence of other three predictors. Since two predictors--experience and % time covering politics--were continuous variables, no means are provided for them.

TABLE 2

"Raw" and Adjusted Mean Paragraphs with MI
Which Would Be Cut If Respondent Had to Cut Story by One Paragraph

Context	Unadjusted Means[a]	Adjusted Means[b]	
Positive	.48	.46	N=29[c]
Controversial	.82	.84	N=23[c]
News Agency Type			
Wire/bureau	.81	.94	N=11[c]
Newspapers	.58	.55	N=41[c]

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p-level
Experience in Years	.075	1	.075	.365	---
% Time Politics	.386	1	.386	1.870	---
Context	1.491	1	1.491	7.217	$p < .01$
Agency	.449	1	.449	2.173	---
Residual	9.708	47	.207		

a Unadjusted scores are raw means for each group, calculated before apparent influence of other three predictors removed.

b Adjusted mean scores reflect differences between groups after removing apparent influence of other three predictors. Since two preictors--experience and % time covering politics--were continuous variables, no means are provided for them.

c Number of cases lower than 56, since not all Ss responded to this question.

TABLE 3

"Raw" and Adjusted Mean Paragraphs with MI Which Would Be Cut If Respondents Had to Cut Story by Two Paragraphs

Context	Unadjusted Means[a]	Adjusted Means[b]	
Positive	.96	.95	N=28[c]
Controversial	1.65	1.67	N=23[c]
News Agency Type			
Wire/bureau	1.50	1.59	N=10[c]
Newspapers	1.22	1.19	N=41[c]

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p-level
Experience in Years	.136	1	.136	.407	---
% Time Politics	.356	1	.356	1.066	---
Context	5.801	1	5.801	17.375	$p < .001$
Agency	.459	1	.459	1.373	---
Residual	6.798	43	.334		

a Unadjusted scores are raw means for each group, calculated before apparent influence of other three predictors removed.

b Adjusted mean scores reflect differences between groups after removing apparent influence of other three predictors. Since two predictors--experience and % time covering politics--were continuous variables, no means are provided for them.

c Number of cases lower than 56, since not all Ss responded to this question.

TABLE 4

"Raw" and Adjusted Mean Paragraphs with MI Which Would Be Cut If Respondent Had to Cut Story by Four Paragraphs

Context	Unadjusted Means[a]	Adjusted Means[b]	
Positive	1.96	1.95	N=25[c]
Controversial	2.74	2.74	N=23[c]
News Agency Type			
Wire/bureau	2.70	2.74	N=10[c]
Newspapers	2.23	2.22	N=38[c]

Source of Variance	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p-level
Experience in Years	.049	1	.049	.082	---
% Time Politics	.083	1	.083	.140	---
Context	7.126	1	7.126	11.979	P <.001
Agency	1.552	1	1.552	2.609	---
Residual	25.577	43	.595		

a Unadjusted scores are raw means for each group, calculated before apparent influence of other three predictors removed.

b Adjusted mean scores reflect differences between groups after removing apparent influence of other three predictors. Since two predictors--experience and % time covering politics--were continous variables, no means are provided for them.

c Number of cases lower than 56, since not all Ss responded to this question.

Footnotes

1 E.g., Carl Bybee, "Mobilizing Information and Reader Involvement: An Empirical Test," Journalism Quarterly, 59: 399-405, 413 (Autumn 1982); James B. Lemert and Roxana J. Cook, "Mobilizing Information in Broadcast Editorials and 'Free Speech' Messages," Journal of Broadcasting, 26: 493-96 (Winter 1982).

2 Does Mass Communication Change Public Opinion After All? A New Approach to Effects Analysis (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1981), p. 118.

3 Ibid.

4 See especially James B. Lemert, Barry N. Mitzman, Michael A. Seither, Roxana J. Cook and Regina Hackett, "Journalists and Mobilizing Information," Journalism Quarterly, 54: 721-26 (Winter 1977).

5 Ibid., pp. 134-36.

6 Loc. cit.

7 Norman H. Nie, C. Hadlai Hull, Jean G. Jenkins, Karin Steinbrenner and Dale H. Bent, Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, Second Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), pp. 409-22.

8 See especially Lemert, Mitzman, et al., op. cit.

9 Ibid. and Does Mass Communication. . . ?

APPENDIX

The Experimental Stories

Positive context news story followed by controversial context version.

Identical mobilizing information is located in the same paragraphs (Paragraphs No. 4, 6, 8 and 9) in each version.

Stories appear as they were presented to separate groups of experimental subjects.

Bugs
1-1-1

Another wave of bugs may be destroying huge amounts of Douglas fir. ¶1

This time, the threat is from bark beetles (also known as wood borers) that first hit private timber stands in southern Oregon and now have been found near McMinnville, according to the Oregon State Department of Forestry. ¶2

There is no immediate threat from the beetles to either public or private timber stands close to Portland, Forestry department spokesmen said, but next year might prove to be an "entirely different story." ¶3

State entomologist LeRoy Kline said the only presently available means of controlling the spread of the bugs is to cut down the infested trees and/or to prune off the infested limbs--and burn them. ¶4

The problem with waiting until damage is visible, however, is that it is sometimes a long time before trees which are already dead or dying show any outward signs of the infestation, Kline said. ¶5

The plump, six-legged beetles work by attacking Douglas firs in droves drilling into the innermost layer of the bark to make tunnels for mating and hatching eggs. ¶6

Kline said the pests are not just a threat to the timber industry--already hard-hit by economic woes--but to home owners, as well. Home owners should inspect their Douglas fir trees. ¶7 ¶8

Kline said the lower limbs of the trees should be inspected closely every week this summer for signs of trouble, starting

more

now and continuing through September.

Persons wishing further information about the problem can dontact the Oregon State Department of Forestry, 2600 State Street, Salem, or an industry group, the North West Timber Association, 1335 Oak Street, Eugene.

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Another wave of bugs may be destroying huge amounts of Douglas fir—and stimulating pressure for use again of the controversial pesticide DDT to control it. ¶1

This time, the threat is from bark beetles (also known as wood borers) that first hit private timber stands in southern Oregon and now have been found near McMinnville, according to the State Department of Forestry. ¶2

Forest industry spokesmen hinted they might have to call again for DDT to be used if present control methods prove ineffective. DDT has been banned by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, but its use recently was allowed to control the tussock moth infestation in eastern Oregon and Washington. ¶3

State entomologist LeRoy Kline said the only presently available way of controlling the beetles is to cut down infested trees and/or to prune off infested limbs—and burn them. But sometimes it takes a long time before the trees show outward signs of infestation, Kline said. ¶4

Environmentalists complain that DDT has a prolonged after-life, entering step by step into the higher stages of the food chain until ultimately it is consumed by humans. ¶5

The plump, six-legged beetles work by attacking Douglas firs in droves, drilling into the innermost layer of the bark to make tunnels for mating and hatching eggs. ¶6

There is no immediate threat from the beetles to either public or private forests close to Portland, Forestry department spokesmen said, but next year may be a different story. ¶7

Kline said the pests are not just a threat to the timber industry. Home owners also should inspect their Douglas fir trees this summer. He said the lower limbs of the trees should be inspected closely every ¶8

week for signs of trouble, starting now and continuing through September.

Persons wishing further information about the problem can contact the Oregon State Department of Forestry, 2600 State Street, Salem, or an industry group, the North West Timber Association, 1335 Oak Street, Eugene. 9:19

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